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Good Governance in China: Confucian Values in Historical and Modern Perspective

Introduction

Imperial China is well known for having one of the most stable forms of government in world history. This form of government came into existence in 221 bce with the establishment of the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221-207 bce). This form of government lasted from 221 bce until 1911 of the current era – a period of more than 2000 years. The basic form of government was what we would call today a centralized bureaucracy. It was led by an emperor, and was staffed by a bureaucracy.

Within this system the emperor was legitimized by what was called the “Mandate of Heaven”. If one was ruling, as the theory went, in accord with “heaven’s mandate” or “heaven’s wishes”, signs of such rule would be good harvests, a satisfied and essentially happy population, no major disasters such as floods or earthquakes, etc. In this system the emperor drew his power directly from heaven – by living and acting in accord with heaven. The system was hereditary. The male descendents of the emperor not only inherited the throne, but also the Mandate of Heaven and the power that went with it. The children of the emperor were educated in “proper rule” or “good governance” which meant rule in accord with Heaven’s Mandate.

Conversely, an emperor could lose the “Mandate of Heaven” and be overthrown. In theory, this would happen when clearly the emperor was ruling in a way in which there were poor harvests, famine, natural disasters, etc. The people could rise up and a new emperor (and new dynasty) would begin a new reign – restoring the Mandate of Heaven.

The concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” (Tian Ming 天命) predates the birth of Confucius and the development of Confucianism. It is a very old idea and assumes a certain view of the Cosmos – man’s relationship to his environment in all of its infinite manifestations. In this view all humans (Chinese) are connected to “Heaven” via the emperor (or king or prince). “Heaven” is defined as an impersonal “metaphysical power”. Individuals cannot directly communicate with “Heaven”, but only through the Emperor. Imperial communication with Heaven is with the assistance of those who have a mastery of the written language (Chinese characters).

Associated with the concept of emperorship and rule, is also the idea of “The Way” (Dao 道). This also is a very ancient idea predating Confucianism. There are two aspects of “The Way”: one is what we call today “Religious Daoism” and the other is what we call today “Philosophical Daoism”. The very famous

text, The Dao De Jing (道德经) is in many ways a prolonged discussion on “good government” and focuses on the idea of “Order”: what it is, and how man can be in accord with “Order.” – not by trying to construct some kind of “perfect order” but by being one with “The Way”. Some of the key ideas here are that of: “non-doing” (By doing nothing everything is accomplished”). This is the idea of non-intervention and a minimum of government. All Chinese Emperors, throughout all of Chinese history, were at varying degrees very interested in Daoism and in this approach to government.

Also, predating Confucianism and very important in understanding Chinese concepts of “Good Governance” are early Chinese concepts of the definition of who or what populations were considered “Chinese” and to be governed as citizens of the State, and how the relationship between a “Chinese Government” and a non-Chinese government entity or state should be conducted . Greatly simplifying things, those who wrote or spoke Chinese language (particularly the written language) were defined as “Chinese”. Those peoples and societies who did not were defined as “Other” or “Barbarians” and were not only not Chinese but were also defined as inferior.

Confucius (Kong Qiu 孔丘(Kongfuzi 孔夫子))is born in the 6th century bce in the small State of Lu in the town of Qufu (in modern day Shandong Province). His focus throughout his life is on “good governance”. His 71 disciples gather his sayings and conversations into the classic work that is today translated as The Analects (Lun Yu 论语). This key work has many different layers, and was apparently put together over a very long time after Confucius’ death. For the purposes of this paper what is important is what he does not say. Confucius essentially accepts as a given the “Cosmos” as described above, and is not interested in discussing this at all. He is not interested in discussing what happens to man after death. He is not interested in discussing “man’s purpose on earth.” His focus is that given the present Cosmos, how can one make a better existence on earth. His focus is on family life and government. His belief is that government is in many ways like a family, and that one behaves as a subject similarly to how one behaves as a son or daughter. Essential to Confucius’ teachings were the following:

- 1) Importance of ritual/ceremony
- 2) Importance of the family
- 3) Importance of “The Sage” as an advisor in government and as an exemplar
 - a. Anyone can become a “Sage” through education
- 4) There is a “right order” and a “wrong order” and this is knowable
 - a. There is an ordered hierarchy in the world
- 5) Focus on study and “action” in this world
 - a. System of ethical behavior focused on this world

- b. Not a moral/religious system focused on life after death

Concepts of Good Governance in Late Imperial China

In the first thousand years of imperial governance in China there were many competing claims affecting theories of “good governance.” This period from roughly 221 bce through 907 ce – the period of the Han & Tang Dynasties and the great period of foreign invasion and growth of Buddhism in China – saw Confucian ideas of government flourish and then dramatically decline in importance for centuries, and then begin to grow again in importance by the late Tang Dynasty.

By the founding of the Song Dynasty in 970 ce – the relatively mature late imperial Confucian state emerges, and remains relatively intact for the next thousand years. By the beginning of this period in 970 ce the population of China was 60 million. By the end of the period the population had grown to approximately 450 million.

Steel production volumes in the year 1100 in the Song Dynasty was not matched by Great Britain until the year 1800 – well into the “industrial revolution” in Europe. The GDP of China in 1800 was greater than the GDP of all Europe in the same year. China was a vast and complicated country and yet at no time during these thousand years did the Chinese “Official Bureaucracy” exceed 25,000 serving officials. Every one of these officials was a “state certified” master of the Confucian heritage. These officials ruled over one of the most stable governments in world history.

We can say for the last thousand years of Chinese imperial history that the entire discussion of “what was good governance” was contained within the Confucian tradition. But, within that tradition there were vastly different points of view on this question. To discuss the heritage of Confucian values and thoughts in modern China we can say a few things briefly about what most Confucians agreed on, and what they didn’t agree on.

Areas of Confucian Agreement that we have already discussed:

1. View of the Cosmos
2. Mandate of Heaven
3. The order of the world and the universe is “knowable” (epistemology)
4. Definition of “Chineseness” and “The Other/Barbarians”
5. Graded Inequality
6. Education as the path to “Sagehood”
7. Centrality of the Family
8. Importance of Ritual/Ceremony

9. Focus on “This World”
10. Centralized “bureaucratic system”
11. Importance of “Study” and “Action”

Other Areas of Confucian Agreement that we have not discussed:

1. China’s “Golden Age” was in the past
2. Importance of “Harmony” and the Center/Mean
 - a. Moderation in all things
3. Importance of the agricultural sector
 - a. Importance of land
 - b. Rank order of the “four classes” in Confucian society
 1. Officials
 2. Agriculture/Peasants
 3. Artisans
 4. Merchants
4. Appointment to government positions should be based on merit
5. Primacy of the “civil” over the “military”
6. Primacy of the group over the individual
 - a. Importance of relationships
 - b. Extremely limited appreciation of the “individual as hero” (Western Concept)

Areas within Confucianism Open to Disagreement among Confucians

1. The degree of Intervention of government in society
2. Size and role of government
 - a. Limited government is best, but at times the need is great for larger government

- b. "The least government is the best government"
- 3. Role of merchants and market economy
 - a. State monopolies such as salt
 - b. Limited or no taxation on commercial wealth/income
 - c. Limited intervention by the state in the market economy
 - d. Prohibition of all "foreign trade"
 - 1. All foreign relations of any type can only be carried out by the Emperor
 - 2. Southern Song Exception
- 4. Pragmatism in Government vs. Ethical/moral behavior
 - a. The ends justify the means vs. "right behavior"
 - b. Management expertise vs. Ethical correct behavior
 - c. A "strong government" for what end?

What specifically were the main ideas of "good governance" within Confucianism?

- 1. Maintenance of a just and equitable society: a "well regulated society"
 - a. Famine relief
 - b. Disaster relief
 - c. Law & Order
 - d. Infrastructure development & maintenance
 - 1. Roads & Rivers
 - 2. Canals
- 2. Maintenance of a strong military for purposes of Defense
 - a. Great Wall
 - b. Border Control
 - c. Piracy & Coastal Defense

3. Maintenance of equitable and efficient taxation system
 - a. state intervention to prevent tax abuses
 1. removal of land from tax roles
 - b. state intervention in religion to prevent tax abuses
 - c. Least taxes possible in order to maintain order and provide for the common defense
4. Active role in development of all policy
5. No or very limited government role in education system
 - a. Examination system and few state sponsored schools related to the exam
 - b. No state involvement in a national school system
6. No state involvement in health system
7. No state involvement in religion

What were the main criteria for preparation for government office?

1. Mastery of the Confucian canon as tested in the examination system.
 - a. Knowledge of the texts
 - b. Ability to apply Confucian learning to government problems
2. Mastery of the Chinese written language
 - a. Quality of the prose written as revealed in the exam essays
 - b. Ability to write in the exam form of "Eight-legged Essays"
3. Mastery of Chinese history and lessons learned from that history
4. Entry into government officialdom limited to males only
 - a. Mirror to the Imperial System (no women emperors)
 1. Women's place was in the home/family
 - a. No minimum or maximum age
 - b. No racial or ethnic barriers to entry

Why was mastery of the Confucian texts and the Chinese language the key to government office and good governance?

1. Centrality of shared value system & communication system
2. Vast differences in the Chinese spoken language (Cantonese vs. Mandarin)
 - a. All who passed the exam system shared the same language
 - b. Compare with Western “linguistic nationalism”
3. What about “management” “science” “technology”
 - a. Part of vast “sub-bureaucracy” of locally hired subject “experts”

Collapse of the Confucian System in 1911

By the end of the nineteenth century China was facing two kinds of severe problems that the government could not overcome. From without China was ravaged by foreign invasions and attacks from the West and from Japan. Beginning with the Opium Wars in the 1840s, through the “foreign partition of China” in the 1880s and 1890s China was revealed of incapable of defending its borders and maintaining order within its borders. From within, by approximately 1800 China’s population where the existing economic/agricultural system could no longer support the population at even the most minimal level of economic subsistence. To greatly simplify the story, by the early years of the twentieth century many Chinese felt that the existing government of China, the Qing Dynasty, had lost the Mandate of Heaven. Many Chinese also felt the entire Confucian system of thought and government was incapable of responding effectively to the twin onslaught of external aggression and internal economic exhaustion. In 1905, the Confucian examination system was abolished in favor of a system of official education and appointment based on “real knowledge” “scientific knowledge” as known in the West. Similarly, it was viewed that a new type of government in China – one based on some form of Western democracy was required for China to survive. The old Chinese government of the Qing Dynasty quietly collapsed and disappeared from history in 1911. Some way of establishing and promoting the new twin values of “Science and Democracy” became the rallying cry of all Chinese interested in “saving” China and establishing a new form of government that could defend China from outside predation, and promote a new economic system that could bring from starvation and collapse back to its rightful place one of the most prosperous nations the world has even known.

Emergence and Success of Communism: 1930s to the Present

In the 1920s, immediately following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the fledgling Chinese Communist Party adopted the very radical position of the complete rejection of Confucianism in totality. By doing so the Chinese Communists cut themselves off completely from their own illustrious history, in favor of a “foreign philosophy.” They completely rejected the Confucian view of “Cosmos”, “Mandate of Heaven” “Examination System” “Social Order” and “Confucian Epistemology”.

Adaptation to 1930s Environment and Founding of People’s Republic to 1957

During this time in China various groups contending for power established “Western Style” university system. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, many universities established after 1911 were allowed to continue. At the same time the Government moved to establish new universities in every provincial capital and large city. The new universities offered a very broad curriculum, but the promotion and development of “scientific research” was chief among the goals in establishing the new universities. China’s first step in redefining its system of foreign relations, was the establishment of its strategic alliance with the Soviet Union. China was no longer to be defined as the “center of the universe.” During the 1950s China was essentially blocked from establishing diplomatic relations with Western countries, and was similarly blocked from joining the United Nations.

Immediately after the founding in 1949, the government also commenced to carry out a massive reform of the Chinese Language. The Chinese language was perceived as too difficult for most Chinese to learn. In order for the government to establish any type of participative democracy, China needed an educated people, and in order to broadly increase levels of education and literacy in China it was believed that the language must be made “simpler” for the average Chinese to learn. In the new system established in the 1950s, the writing of the Chinese characters were greatly simplified, and an attempt was made to restrict all government publications and newspaper to approximately 2000 characters out of 48,000 characters in use during imperial times.

Other very important changes at this time that greatly undermined the old Confucian value system included: declaration of “equality” in all relationships, but particularly gender equality; primacy of the state over the individual and the family; primacy of a “Strong State” and a State deeply intervening in society; and the declared replacement of Confucian texts with Marxism-Leninism – Mao thought

Period of Readjustment 1957-1977

From 1957 to the death of Mao in 1976, one can see this period as one of readjustment of the original goals of the revolution, and as an attempt to “Sinify” or “Make Chinese” the new government and state of China as established in 1949. In 1960. China split with Soviet Union. During the 1960s one sees the emergence of Mao’s “Little Red Book” as the only text needed to create a new system of shared values. From 1967-1977 all Chinese universities were closed in order to carryout the Great Proletarian Cultural

Revolution. Mao turns Marx on his head declaring “Consciousness determines class”. The development of scientific learning must wait until Chinese class consciousness is aligned with the goals of the revolution. During this period the infamous “Red Guard” carryout an extreme attack on all vestiges of Confucian tradition. Anyone who in anyway seems to be associating with any identified Confucian values traditions are mercilessly attacked.

Post-Mao Era 1977 to the Present

Since the death of Mao the Chinese Government has been committed to a path of pragmatism in government and economic affairs. This was led initially by Deng Xiaoping, but this essential orientation has remained in effect since 1977. China has assumed its role in the world community as a: “Member” of the United Nations, and as a “Member” of the World Trade Organization. The universities have reopened, and many new universities have been built. Efforts continue to “democratize” Chinese society through language reform; through increased efforts for achieving language literacy in the countryside; and through increased efforts to make Chinese Mandarin a common shared language for all – the example of Hong Kong being a case in point. Since 1997, with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese government control all Hong Kong Chinese have been required to begin the study of Chinese Mandarin. The Chinese government has attempted to show toleration and respect of China’s heritage, including Confucianism. During the last decade in Shandong Province the government has mounted a major effort to rebuild and restore the famous Confucian Temple and Tomb in Qufu, Shandong Province, and even to build a major Confucian tourist attraction and theme park in Qufu.

In certain very important ways I have tried to describe the vast attack on the Confucian system of values that for more than 2000 years formed the foundation for Confucian views on governance and good governance. The old Confucian system has been denounced and discarded, but it is not always clear what the new system is in certain key respects.

Good Governance in Modern China: The Case of Shandong University School of Political Science and Public Administration (SUSPSA)

Beginning in December, 2007 Clark University’s College of Professional and Continuing Education established an educational presence in the capital of Shandong Province, Jinan City. Shandong Province is historically the home province of Confucius and the center of a vast heritage of Confucian sites, temples, and museums all devoted to the preservation of China’s Confucian heritage in all of its manifestations. Shandong Province is also a province of 93 million people and 140 universities, graduating each year 500,000 students. Shandong University stands at the very apex of education achievement in Shandong. It is one of 19 “national universities” in China. Shandong University enrolls the best of the best students in all of China. Shandong University is the single largest university in all of

China. At present it enrolls 50,000 full-time undergraduate and graduate students, and 70,000 additional part-time students.

In the fall of 2010 Clark University will launch two different Master in Public Administration (MPA) Programs in coordination with Shandong University's School of Political Science and Public Administration. The first program will be a dual degree program whereby students who are presently studying at Shandong's SUSPSA will over a period of three years complete all the courses in both Shandong's Program and in the Clark MPA Program. These students will spend their final 6 months in the program at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. The second program will be a Clark University stand-alone MPA Program offered to students through Shandong University. This program is designed mainly for students who are in some sense "non-traditional" students in China. This will be a two year program culminating in a final 6 months stay at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Dean of Shandong's SUSPSA is the 77th generation direct descendent of Confucius. His name is Kong Lingdong. His son, the 78th generation direct descendent of Confucius is a student at Clark University, in Clark's College of Professional and Continuing Education. Dean Kong visited Clark University last month for the purpose of visiting his son and to conclude negotiations for the launch of our program next year. The SUSPSA Program under the leadership of Dean Kong is considered one of the best programs for preparation of government officials in China.

In preparation for the launch of our program next year, we are now in the process of delivering an experimental trial MPA program for 14 mid-level Chinese government officials from Shandong Province. All 14 of these officials/students have been to Clark to study in our MPA. 7 of the 14 were able to attend classes this past fall in our MPA. The other 7 were able to only come to Clark for one week for an intensive seminar on public administration. All of the meetings with these students were conducted through the use of interpreters. Several of the students had excellent English, but most had only passive listening and reading ability.

All 14 of the students have now returned to China to their jobs, but are continuing to attend Clark University classes hosted at Shandong University SUSPSA Campus on weekends. In this case we are pairing an American Clark faculty with a senior faculty member of the SUSPSA Program to deliver our courses. All US course syllabi are translated into Chinese and are also adapted to the specific environment in China relative to the course. Where possible, if there is a Chinese translation of the text we use at Clark, we have adopted that text for our course in China. We have taught two courses so far by this method. The first teacher from SUSPSA who we paired with, also spent the entire summer at Clark this past year. So, we were able to obtain a somewhat deeper understanding of his thinking on what we are doing.

What have we learned so far about Chinese concepts of "good governance" based on our work with SUSPSA, and specifically with the first group of 14 "public administration" students we have worked with? I will speak only about my own observations. I have not taught any of the classes, but I have been very deeply involved in the process to date.

The 14 Students in Clark's Experimental MPA Program in China

1. All of the students have been very interested in learning about "management tools." They were very interested in our course on "Strategic Management" for example. This particular course was taught by one of our very best and most charismatic teachers at Clark. All of our domestic students also like that particular professor So, that fact that somewhat skews this observation.

2. In the Clark way of teaching, we use a process of "facilitated discussion" whereby the students need to understand the public administrative theories presented to them, and reflect back to the class on their own experiences as observed in the light of new ways of thinking. The 7 students, working through interpreters, excelled at this process.

3. The best of these 14 students are as good as any student we have ever had in the MPA Program at Clark. They were able to correctly understand the course assignment given them, and to write a paper based on "applying" the theories etc. learned in the classroom to their own work situation in a convincing manner. They wrote their papers in Chinese, and the US instructors reviewed English language translations of the papers. Through a process of trial and error we found that some translators were much better than others. We have tried to "correct" for that particular problem, by establishing only approved translators to work with our students.

4. In the two classes at SUSPSA that are being co-taught by Chinese and US faculty, in each case the 14 students divided up into three groups, to write group papers. Several of what I consider to be the very best of the 14 students ended up in the same group, and not surprising to me, they wrote the very best paper of the three groups. What was striking in my opinion, of the best paper was the clarity of their argument and the power of their analysis.

5. As far as "good governance" for this group of 14 students, in my opinion, what these students have revealed in these specific papers to date, and their very approach to study at Clark is that "good governance" is directly related to education, and the content of that education needs to be as widely drawn as possible – but clearly includes a much deeper understanding of western approaches to public administration management, policy analysis, and case studies. There is nothing, whatsoever, revealed, in my opinion, about some underlying Confucian basis for these students' approach to our course material. On the contrary, these students are very interested in engaging Clark University faculty in a friendly "debate" on the merits of Chinese Communist economic development and governance vs. US capitalist models of economic development and governance. Implicit in this desire for debate with Clark is a sense that the Chinese system of strategic planning is simply superior to anything in the West.

The SUSPSA MPA Program and Faculty and Administration

Curriculum: The SUSPSA Program of 15 courses is somewhat revealing in what SUSPSA considers important in the education of their students for public administration careers in China. The 15 courses are as follows:

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|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1. English for Public Administration | 8. Management Information Systems |
| 2. Chinese Socialist Construction | 9. Organizational Behavior |
| 3. Public Administration | 10. Public Finance |
| 4. Chinese Government and Politics | 11. Leadership |
| 5. Research Methods | 12. Public Employee Systems |
| 6. Administrative Law | 13. Risk Management |
| 7. Political Theory | 14. Public Sector Human Resource Management |
| | 15. Social Security Policy |

Most of these courses match up well with Clark MPA Program courses. Certainly a course such as “Chinese Socialist Construction” does not match, but courses such as “Chinese Government and Politics” have their American analog in courses such as “American Government and Politics (a course in Clark’s undergraduate government program).

My two comments to date on the curriculum are as follows:

- 1) For being one of, if not the most prestigious public administration programs in all of China, it is certainly not “top heavy” with courses on Communism and/or Marxist theories of economic development and management.
- 2) It is worth noting that in the proposed “stand-alone” Clark University MPA that will also be supported fully by SUSPSA, there is no concern, whatsoever, about any lack of courses on such topics as “Chinese Socialist Construction.” Students in that program will get an education preparing them for public administration careers in China without any courses specifically in what might be termed an approach to good governance based on a knowledge and appreciation of communism in China.

Faculty: I have met about half of the faculty who are teaching in SUSPSA. Many of the faculty are quite young, and many are western educated. Many speak excellent English. The one faculty member I have gotten to know rather well is western educated and like our 14 students discussed above, would welcome a “debate” or friendly discussion on the merits of Chinese Communism and Governance vs. American Capitalism and Governance.

Administration: Even though the Dean of SUSPSA is the 77th generation direct descendent of Confucius, and to my direct knowledge is very conversant with Confucian texts, there is no sense of Confucian ideas of “good governance” perse in the curriculum at SUSPSA reviewed to date.

Concepts of good governance, in general, as revealed in the SUSPSA curriculum, as espoused by faculty teaching in the program, and by students studying in the CLARK MPA Program in China are grounded in good approaches to management, planning, and analysis. These concepts are apparently further informed by a deeper understanding of Chinese Communism, but this deeper understanding is not necessarily part of the formal public administration curriculum at Shandong University.

Some Concluding Remarks

Old traditions die very hard and very slowly. The inertia of thousands of years of Chinese Confucian traditions concerning how rule in China is legitimized; concerning what is the proper role of government in society are cases in point.

Legitimation: In the old pre-Confucian and Confucian government rule and exercise of power was legitimized by concepts concerning the Cosmos and the Mandate of Heaven. In modern Western societies, rule is legitimized by a belief in the fairness and integrity of a democratic voting process. In China a view persists that the present Chinese government does not possess the Mandate of Heaven. There is no reason to believe that this view is grounded in some attempt to restore a Confucian world view, but rather seems to be grounded in a lack of alternative satisfactory explanations for understanding what system of legitimation has, in fact, replaced the old very well known system of the Mandate of Heaven. On September 27th of this year, the state-run Jinzhou Evening News accidentally published a color picture of a street scene in Jinzhou with sensational graffiti written on a post in the picture clearly stating “Heaven will eliminate the Chinese Communist Party; Save yourself by quitting it.”

Proper Role of Government: One of the cardinal tenets of the Chinese Government today is the importance of a very strong government – both militarily and economically. China cannot forget the lessons of the last 200 years during which time China was not able to defend itself against its enemies, and could not protect its citizens from disaster and starvation. The idea of a “very strong government” runs counter to the very strongly held Confucian belief that “the least government is the best government.” Government should not intervene in society unless absolutely necessary. The recent popular movie Hero, directed by the very famous Zhang Yimou makes the case for the importance of a strong government to unify China and protect it from those who would wish to harm it. In the movie, no other than the world famous martial arts movie star Jet Li debates the sitting Emperor concerning this question. And at the end of the debate Jet Li decides the emperor is correct and that the needs of a strong state are paramount. In the final scene of the movie, the great “Hero” Jet Li allows himself to be killed by the soldiers of the state of Qin who he had vowed to fight against. Zhang Yimou is also the person who last summer directed the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. That opening ceremony also spoke volumes about the benefits to the Chinese people of a powerful Chinese government.

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